

ME.  
Chapter 1.

I had resigned from the Post Master General's Department early in the days of the 1st. world war, full of youthful exuberance and determined to do "my bit" for my King and Country. I had taken a short course in radio communication and offered my services to the Royal Australian Navy.

I was accepted, given a 2nd Class railway ticket to Sydney and instructed to report aboard the troopship H.M.A.T. "Wiltshire", shortly to sail for the United Kingdom.

Never previously having travelled far afield from Melbourne, the train trip to Sydney, with all the discomforts of a cramped seat; the long night hours; the cold; the lack of knowledge of the outside world, and the absence of friends and relations had at least an element of excitement. Arrival in Sydney next morning presented an anti climax. There ~~was~~ nobody to meet me; I did not know the geography of Sydney; I was hungry but did not have the knowledge, or common sense, that would have enabled me to "cloak" my cases and find a cafe. Somehow, probably by tram, I found my way to Circular Quay and from there, after putting up a plaintive plea, was rather ungratiously taken to the gangway of "Wiltshire" on a R.A.N. tender.

The "old man", Captain Heyward with whom I later became reasonably friendly, accepted me with little grace. "What was I doing aboard?" "Who sent me and why?". "Are your papers in order, you are but a kid"? He soon discovered that my papers were not in order and forthwith sent me ashore to remain there until they were. He did, however, suggest with rather bad grace that I should visit the Shipping Office.

All bad things have an ending with the result that I was finally signed on the ship, took my rather battered cases aboard and was given a 2-berth passenger cabin "until something else" could be found for me. Nothing else was ever found for me and I made that my home away from home during two years at sea. It was necessary, however, later to share that small space with another crew member with whom I did not always see eye to eye. I had been brought up in a very strict home where smoking and drinking were both inventions of the Devil with the result that, at times, I found the life in that cabin almost more than my young and inexperienced person could bear.

The "Wiltshire" remained tied up at No. 1 buoy for several days. Coal and provision lighters came alongside to discharge fuel for both engines and men. I discovered later that our boilers used about 110 tons of coal per day which meant that we would leave Sydney with something about 3000 tons of bunker coal aboard. I discovered later, too, that when we left Sydney there would be about 2000 souls aboard the ship and this, of course, meant that we must load tons of meat, tons of flour, tons of tinned milk and tons of much other items of food. While we were tied up at No. 1 buoy there was some difficulty in getting ashore and back on board again. However, whether "Tubby" Heyward felt a little sorry for the youngster who had joined his ship or whether he felt that I had at least a little sense of responsibility, Captain Heyward selected me to collect the

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mail from the office ashore each day and sometimes gave me other messenger duties to perform. I took this to be an honor bestowed upon me and tried very hard to please the "old man" with, I believe, some success as later parts of the story of life in "Wiltshire" will indicate.

At last the day came when the ship was moved alongside at Woolloomooloo. Here, army equipment soon began to come aboard and, finally, before daylight one morning I awoke to hear much activity on the wharf. As soon as I could pull on some clothes I went on deck to find a sight that still lives on. The wharf was packed with soldiers in uniform while outside the dock gates was a big assembly of wives, sweethearts, fathers and mothers to bid farewell to the soldiers going overseas. There were coarse shouts; there were funny remarks; there were hand-shakes, there was some singing and there were tears. I had nobody to sigh for me nor to cry for me; I stood alone in the quiet corner of the boat deck and tried to be a man. The 750 New South Wales troops were soon aboard, streamers fluttered in the early morning breeze, a band played, the ship's lines were singled up and soon we were moving slowly out into the stream. We anchored in Athol Bight.

As the day wore on so did the weather change. Rain fell; the wind blew and the choppy sea in the harbour built up. About 4pm several of the Sydney ferries ranged alongside and disgorged through our gangways another 850 troops who had travelled down by train from Queensland. Now, with a crew of over 300 all told we had on board "Wiltshire" something between 1900 and 2000 souls which, by 1st war standards was a goodly number of people to have aboard any ship of war. The sun set behind rain clouds; the curtain of night folded around us; the pilot came aboard; the anchor was hove in and soon we were heading for the open sea.

"Wiltshire" or as she was <sup>THEN</sup> ~~now~~ more correctly known, H.M.A.T. (His Majesty's Australian Transport) A18, was, in peace time a Federal Shire Line passenger and cargo steamer of some 14,000 tons, that traded between England and Australia. She had considerable refrigerated space for the carriage of frozen meat and butter to the old country but also had payable space for the carriage of general cargo. Normally she carried but one Wireless Officer; now that she was a troopship and would be entering war zones she carried 3 such officers. The Senior Wireless Officer was an Englishman of rather reserved habits and with whom it was almost impossible to develop a conversation. The second man, like myself, was an Australian; I was the very junior third man. It was apparently traditional that the junior man should be given the 4 to 8 watch - that is 4am to 8am and 4pm to 8pm.

Soon after leaving Sydney and noticing the motion of the ship I decided that it would be wise to turn in. I was called by the quarter-master at 3 45am (one bell) and turned out immediately, full of enthusiasm for my first real watch at sea. I climbed to the bridge where the wireless room was located and very soon, after a

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brief hand-over the 2nd man departed to enjoy a few hours sleep before breakfast. My enthusiasm was short-lived. Probably I was frightened of my responsibilities; probably it was the extremely strong mug of tea and ship's biscuit delivered to the wireless room by the quarter-master, or probably it was a combination of these and the motion of the ship that made me wish I were still ashore in my old Post Office job. I was ill. I was not in a fit state to keep a wireless watch of a standard that was demanded by the presence aboard of some 2000 souls, but keep a watch I did between bouts of seasickness. Sam finally came and, somehow, I struggled down to my bunk and flung myself upon it still in my uniform which but a few hours earlier had given me so much satisfaction. Nobody cared if I lived or died; nobody came to enquire about my health but the sea got rougher and the ship rose and fell to the ocean swell. As we rounded Gabo Island and headed west across the "paddock", the ship now rolled which I found a little easier than the pitching motion earlier. I had a little fruit in my cabin and had sense enough to eat some of it with the result that I had sufficient strength to climb once again to the bridge and the wireless office at 4pm. The 4pm to 8pm man was relieved between 5 30 and 6pm for tea, which was served in the Officers Mess below the bridge. Somehow I managed to eat something but it refused to remain where it was supposed to do good. Another similar night and another similar day followed. On the third evening at sea my appearance must have rung a bell of sympathy in the mind of the old Chief Engineer - a Scot as one might imagine for this seems to be traditional in Chief Engineers at sea - as I passed him on deck. "Look you here my boy this is no guid; come awa' wi me and I'll gi you a cure for your troubles" is what he said. I would have taken phanyle if it was to cure my troubles. The kindly old "Chief" gave me something in a glass, told me to get into my bunk, to drink his tonic and tomorrow all would be well. In later days it came upon me that the old "Chief" ~~and~~ had given me a double whisky which sent me into the best sleep and the most restful sleep I had experienced for days. Although the quartermaster apparently experienced some difficulty in getting me on my feet at 3 45am next morning I soon recovered in the cool air on deck. I have never since been sick at sea or in the air.

Security is something that is talked about particularly in war time. The enforcing of security is another matter. We were not supposed to know that we were heading from Sydney, non stop, for Durban in South Africa. It is likely, however, that before we left Sydney Heads astern everybody in A18 knew exactly where ~~we~~ we were going and ~~that~~ that we would be at sea for approximately three weeks.

The run across the Indian Ocean was generally fine. The crew settled down to routine jobs; the soldiers, some of them taking longer than I to overcome the seasickness, exercised on deck, played games and wrote letter. Sunday mornings there were church parades. One of my most vivid memories of this part of the trip was listening from the boat deck one fine Sunday morning to three quite independent Church services proceeding in different parts of the ship. This gave

me cause to wonder what it sounds like in Heaven on a Sunday morning. The only band aboard the ship was a small pipe band. I like the pipes in their place but they can become wearisome when there is no other music, day after day, and week after ~~day~~. There was a bugle however and this seemed to be sounded for many purposes and at many times. I could always recognise the "revalle" at 6am (it was sounded from the deck above my wireless office) but otherwise I have never been able to successfully interpret the many Army bugle calls.

Once one becomes accustomed to the sounds at sea it is only when the regular sounds cease that one awakes. There came ~~xxxxxxx~~ an early morning 21 days after leaving Sydney that I awoke. The time was three o'clock; all was quiet. We had arrived in the Durban harbour and the engines had been stopped. As we did not need to keep a wireless watch in port I, after 21 early morning calls could, and did, roll over and go to sleep again until breakfast time. The first leg of our journey to England was over.

At daylight we were put alongside a coal wharf where more coal was <sup>p</sup>ured into our bunkers and where many tons of fresh water also was taken aboard. Some leave was granted but, after only about 12 hours in Durban we sailed again for Cape Town; we followed the coast of South Africa most of the way. I was on watch when we entered the Cape Town harbour and could see the Table Mountain in the background sheltering the city of Cape Town. We anchored about three miles off shore until daylight when we, once again, went alongside a wharf almost at the foot of city's main street. I recall Cape Town for several reasons; one, I saw my first movie there; two, I bought my first camera there; and three, I saw for the first time many colored people. I took a tram ride to a beautiful beach some few miles out of town. I should very much have wished to climb to the top of Table Mountain but time did not permit and, from memory such an expedition then was not looked upon favorably by the locals. I do not recall the circumstances but I was somehow introduced into a friendly family at Cape Town who, with quiet dignity and considerable restraint, gave to me a pleasant evening the memory of which still lingers on.

We were to form a convoy with 5 other steamers and a R.N. escort at Cape Town. One of the steamers was the "Osterley" that was still in Sydney when we left there but which, with her slightly greater speed, was supposed to reach Cape Town almost simultaneously with us. We had to wait three days for her.

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